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INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000915

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/20/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [IR](#) [TU](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH MUSLIM PROTESTS OF MOHAMMED CARTOONS GROW
IN SIZE, REMAIN PEACEFUL

REF: PARIS 754

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Bruce Turner, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Two weekend protests in Paris and Strasbourg were the largest so far in France on the cartoon controversy, but the gatherings remained peaceful and took place without incident. Both gatherings were initiated by groups outside the mainstream of French Muslim organizations, which have called for legal recourse while discouraging street protests. The larger Paris protest numbered over 7,000 and was noteworthy for its orderly manner, while the smaller, Strasbourg gathering attracted about 2,200 and was led by an activist known for anti-Semitic statements. Contacts with the moderate Paris Mosque criticized the organizers of the February 11 Paris protest as opportunistic, and continue to dismiss prospects for unrest among French Muslims, whom they describe as overwhelmingly secular and unfazed by the controversy. With respect to possible threats to French interests in the Muslim world, MFA contacts described the situation as calming down overall, though they described Turkey and Iran as particular countries of concern. MFA contacts concurred with U.S. views that Syria and Iran had sought to manipulate the crisis; the MFA summoned the Iranian charge in Paris to protest the lack of official protection during February 10 Tehran protests in which the French embassy was hit by rocks and molotov cocktails, and publicly rebuked Iran for failure to provide sufficient protection. End summary.

12. (SBU) The February 8 publication of new Mohammed cartoons (as well as the original Danish caricatures) by the marginal French satirical weekly "Charlie Hebdo" prompted a new wave of criticism by the GoF's official Muslim interlocutor, the Council for the French Muslim Faith (CFCM), which sued unsuccessfully to prevent the publication's release and has announced plans for a follow-up lawsuit on the basis of French restrictions on racist speech. The GoF shifted its response to the cartoon controversy towards urging greater media restraint following the "Charlie Hebdo" release, which sold out on the morning of publication and prompted an unprecedented supplemental print run of 300,000 (for a paper which usually prints 85,000 copies). In a communique released February 8, President Chirac condemned "dangerous provocations likely to kindle passions further," and added that "everything that can offend the convictions of others -- religious convictions in particular -- should be avoided." A poll published February 8 showed public opinion moving in the direction of greater media restraint, with 54 percent of respondents agreeing it was wrong for the French newspapers to have printed Mohammed caricatures, though a similar number questioned the level of indignation generated by the drawings.

13. (U) While the CFCM continues to counsel restraint and call for legal recourse, some smaller, hard-line Islamic

organizations outside the CFCM have called for public protests, thus far eschewed by the CFCM's main component groups. On February 11, the largest cartoon-related protest so far took place in Paris, numbering some 7,200 people, according to police estimates. The gathering was organized by the Union of Muslim Associations of Seine-St. Denis, a fundamentalist grouping based in the Parisian suburbs which has been a frequent critic of the CFCM and was founded by former members of the fundamentalist Union for Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF), the third-largest grouping within the CFCM. Press reporting commented on the well-organized nature of the march, which included several hundred women and children and in which protesters carried relatively uniform banners, with slogans such as "Yes to expression, no to provocation," "Don't touch my prophet," and "CFCM, where are you?" A February 12 Strasbourg protest numbered about 2,200 and was organized by the radical-leaning "Muslim Party of France," whose leader, Mohammed Latreche, is known for making anti-Semitic remarks and has in the past organized protests against Israel, the French ban on headscarves in public schools, and false allegations of abuses at Guantanamo.

PARIS MOSQUE ON PARIS PROTEST, CALM AMONG FRENCH MUSLIMS

14. (C) Slimane Naddour, spokesman for the moderate Paris Grand Mosque (which heads the CFCM and works closely with the GoF), in a private discussion with us February 13, described organizers of the February 11 Paris protest as largely uneducated, "self-declared" imams who had tried to exploit the cartoon issue to gain support and discredit the CFCM. Naddour questioned the police estimate of 7,200 protesters, and estimated the crowd as closer to 4,000. He conceded that

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the turnout was higher than he expected, but concluded that the marchers were not all affiliated with the Seine-St. Denis Union of Muslim Associations, which he speculated had received help from the UOIF in exhorting local mosque-goers to attend and sending SMS and internet messages to publicize the event. Naddour noted that both the UOIF and St. Seine Denis Union of Muslim associations had called for adoption of a new French law outlawing "Islamophobic" speech, a new initiative which he viewed as having no chance of success but giving both organizations the opportunity to reposition themselves vis-a-vis other rival Muslim organizations. The Paris Mosque had declined to endorse the so-called "Islamophobia ban," and instead was advocating exhausting legal means to protest the offensive cartoons.

15. (C) Naddour was resolute in the conclusion that the cartoons would not generate unrest among French Muslims. He described the majority of French Muslims as unfazed by the cartoon controversy, as French Muslims understood freedom of expression and were "90 percent non-practicing." According to Naddour, those French Muslims who were offended by the cartoons were not upset by the act of reproducing Mohammed's image, but rather opposed the cartoons' insinuation that the prophet Mohammed, and thereby all Muslims, were terrorists. Naddour conceded that the CFCM lawsuit was not likely to succeed, citing a past, unsuccessful lawsuit which the Paris Mosque had filed against a noted French writer, Michel Houellebecq, for making statements defaming Muslims. Naddour explained that the CFCM needed to show that it was responding to the cartoons as well as reinforce the importance of rule of law, in order not to give radical Islamic groups additional fodder for exploitation. Naddour concluded that the subdued French Muslim reaction to the controversy was proof of the community's maturity, civic-mindedness and largely secular orientation.

MFA CONCERNED ABOUT TURKEY, PROTESTS IRAN'S LACK OF PROTECTION

16. (C) Meanwhile, in a conversation with poloff February 13

about French security considerations overseas, MFA Cabinet Advisor for the Middle East Christophe Guilhou described the cartoon controversy as calming overall, with the exception of Turkey and Iran. In Turkey, he noted, the GoF was concerned by nationalist protests before the French consulate general in Istanbul, which had taken on an increasingly strident tone. In Iran, protesters threw rocks and molotov cocktails at the French embassy during protests February 10, a sign of rising tensions which the GoF attributed to Iranian government instigation. On this point, Guilhou described the GoF as in full agreement with U.S. statements that Syria and Iran were seeking to manipulate the crisis for political ends. In the first public rebuke of Iran on the issue, the MFA spokesman declared February 13 that the Iranian government had not provided sufficient protection for the French embassy in Tehran during the February 10 protest, and accused the GOI of reacting too late to prevent protesters from damaging the facility. The spokesman also called for Iranian authorities to take "all necessary measures to prevent a repetition of such inadmissible acts" and confirmed that the GoF had convoked the Iranian charge d'affaires in Paris to remind him of Iran's Vienna Convention obligations. Even with the incidents in Iran, Guilhou concluded that the cartoon crisis appeared to be calming overall, with increasing recognition, in the French media in particular, that there had been "excesses" on both sides.

COMMENT

17. (C) We agree that prospects for domestic unrest over the Mohammed cartoons appear slim, given France's largely non-practicing Muslim population and the restraint which has been displayed across the spectrum of France's chronically disunited Muslim religious groups, even those seeking to protest publicly and score points over rivals. The one winner domestically appears to be the marginal publications that originally published the offending caricatures, which sold an unprecedented number of issues and, in the case of "France Soir" (the first French paper to reprint the Danish cartoons February 1), had been struggling financially. For the USG, a positive consequence is the GoF's readiness to recognize Iranian and Syrian manipulation of the issue, and its increased willingness to call the Iranians on this publicly.

Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

Stapleton